

# Chapter 1

## A Short History of Golf and Modern Hickory Golf

So what is “Playing Hickory Golf”? Playing hickory golf is playing golf with vintage, wood shaft golf clubs that were manufactured before 1936. Wood shafts were the way the original game of golf was played. Steel shafts were legalized by the USGA in 1924 and by the R&A in 1929, but did not become the dominant shaft choice until after 1930. After 1935, manufacturers were no longer producing wood shaft golf clubs. Of all the woods used for shafts, hickory became the most popular choice so that by 1920, over 95% of all wood shafts produced were hickory; hence, we are playing hickory golf!

Why would we want to play hickory golf? The answers can be as varied as the many different people who play hickory golf. Some golfers want to experience the game of golf the way that Old Tom Morris, Harry Vardon, Bobby Jones and other great players of that earlier era did. Others enjoy playing golf clubs that their favorite old courses were designed to be played with. Many are attracted by the novelty of playing the game with clubs that can be 80 or more years old. And there are those players who have quit chasing the latest high tech equipment and would prefer something more basic, more satisfying and, ultimately, more rewarding. I enjoy improving my golf swing and the hickory clubs require more exacting ball contact than modern “forgiving” golf clubs, they can tell me more precisely just how good I am swinging. I also like the historical aspects of playing with the same kind of clubs and on the same courses as golfers from 100 years ago did. Another aspect that I appreciate is the shorter length that a hickory driver hits the ball.

Now that may really sound odd—who wants to hit a shorter drive? But today’s equipment in the hands of a good player has shortened many courses to “pitch and putt” layouts; a good player today hits a 300+ yard drive so that golf courses that were championship tests of golf 30 years ago are now too short as the good players hit wedge into most of the par 4s and hit an iron second shot into the par 5s. Wonderful courses that are 6,400 to 6,800 yards long simply do not test very many clubs in the bag of a good player today.

A really good championship test of golf today would be contested at 7,400+ yards in length. With the hickory shafts and persimmon heads of yesteryear, most top hickory players today drive the ball 250-270 yards, just like in the 1920s, IF they hit their driver solidly. And instead of having their mishits carry 300 yards, like we see today, a 3/4”

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miss off the toe or heel will likely result in a drive of 180-220 yards! Add an extra 80 yards to your approach shot and see how that changes the golf course!

Many feel the ball is to blame for the current state of affairs in today's golf, but the fact is that the ball goes about the same distance today as in the 1920s. How can that be? Most people are not old enough to remember the golf ball rules that were enacted, first in 1921, and then in 1931 and 1932 to curtail golf ball distances. Originally, there were no rules regarding size and weight of golf balls. Early golfers figured that golf ball size would be self-limiting—who wants a ball so big it won't fit easily into the hole or so small that you can't hit it out of the rough? Better players played the smaller, heavier balls.

The distance that a really good golfer hit his driver began to really increase in the 1910s so that a golf ball rule was enacted in 1921 that limited a ball's size to no smaller than 1.62" in diameter and no heavier than 1.62 ounces in weight. The problem was that this had little effect in curtailing driving distances as players were hitting the ball longer than ever in the 1920s!

Bobby Jones, who retired from competitive golf after his famous Grand Slam victories of 1930, played a 1.62" diameter golf ball during his prime in the 1920s. Here is what he had to say about long driving in his 1927 book, "Down the Fairway": "I remember that at the eleventh hole (of a 1924 tournament) Charlie Hall, the famous Birmingham slugger, with whom I was paired, got away a drive of 360 yards and I nearly matched it with one of 340 yards; the two pokes aggregated just 700 yards. And I got a longer one, potentially, at the fourteenth hole of the same round, where the drive goes straight against a sharply ascending hillside leading up to the green, 340 yards away. With no help whatever in roll, my shot there was just off the corner of the green. I think that is the longest ball I ever hit, for carry, though some have traveled a good deal farther before they stopped rolling. " And this is three very prime years away from Bobby Jones' retirement!

Harry Vardon relates in his book "How To Play Golf", that at his home course at Totteridge in England, he was commonly using a driver and niblick on a 540 yard par 5! There was an outcry then, as now, that the golf ball had gotten too long and was rendering many courses obsolete. So, again, the rules were altered to shorten driving distances and this brought about the split between the USGA and the R&A over the size of the ball (1.68" diameter/1.62 ounces in the USA and 1.62"/1.62 ounces in the rest of the world—which would stand until 1990 when the R&A adopted the American standard).

So golf ball distances were dialed back significantly in the 1930s. Playing with a set of hickory clubs today with a modern ball, many older championship golf courses are again a championship golf course! One of my favorite courses, the championship course at North Berwick in Scotland, at about 6200 yards, is an excellent example of a great course that I feel plays much better with the hickory clubs than modern clubs.

To better understand hickory golf, let us take a brief look back at the history of golf and the evolution of golf club design. Golf's beginnings are lost in the mists of time. We

know golf was being played in Scotland in 1450. The Dutch played a similar game called pall mall from 1300 to 1725, when the game faded out. The two oldest golf courses on the planet are the Old Musselburgh Links, generally considered the oldest, and the Old Course at St. Andrews, both in Scotland. The Old Course at St. Andrews shortened their golf course from 22 holes to the current 18 in the year 1754. At about this same time, shipping records from the port of Leith in Scotland show that a large shipment of golf clubs and golf balls was sent to Charleston, South Carolina!



*John Reid – Founder of the St. Andrews  
Golf Club in Yonkers, NY in 1888*

lasted until about 1850, the gutty era spanned the years 1850-1900, and the wound ball era ran from 1900 on.

In the early 1800s, golf blossomed in Scotland. The harsher coastal climate, where the salt in the seaside air stunted plant growth and made the land unsuitable for both farm and pasture use, was perfect for golf. Golfers used a leather covered ball filled with feathers. Wet feathers were stuffed inside a wet leather cover which was then stitched shut. As the feathers dried, they expanded and as the leather cover dried it contracted, so the ball ended up tight and hard.

The ball's cover was quite soft however and susceptible to being cut so iron clubs were rarely used as the balls were relatively expensive. Think of hitting a small baseball and you can see how the trajectory of this early ball produced a low, running shot.

Later in the 1700s, golf was also being played in New York City during the Revolutionary War! The first recorded golf course in North America was not until 1875 in Canada. The first recorded golf course in the U.S. did not come about until the early 1880s when Oakhurst Links was established near White Sulphur Springs in West Virginia; this course is still in existence and hosts the National Hickory Championship each year. The oldest continuously run golf club in the U.S. is the St. Andrews Club which was started by John Reid in 1888 in Yonkers, New York. Like many old clubs, the golf course has been updated so many times over the years, the latest a Jack Nicklaus redesign, that it is vastly changed from the original course.

There are three distinct eras of wood shaft play defined by the golf ball used during these periods. They are: the feather ball era, the gutty era, and the wound ball era. The feather ball era

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Clubheads were long from heel to toe with a shallow face depth to aid in getting the ball airborne. Stronger, skilled players could drive the ball about 180 yards. Par was unknown. Few players broke 100 for a score over the Old Course at St. Andrews during this time.

Match play was the preferred competitive mode. Allan Robertson who took care of the Old Course was regarded as the best player of the day. The problem with the feather ball, outside of the fact that it was time consuming to make and that they cut easily, was that when it rained, which was quite often in the unpredictable weather of Scotland, the leather cover of the feather ball would soak up water and become heavy, loose and unplayable. That was too bad because the sandy coastal soil would soak up the worst downpours and the golf courses would remain very playable.

The solution to this problem came about in 1845, when the gutta percha or gutty ball came on the scene. This ball was made from rubber tree sap imported from the East Indies and Asia, and molded into a smooth surfaced golf ball. Quickly it was discovered that dents in the cover made it fly straighter and so the many different surface patterns began their evolution. This solid rubber ball was, of course, impervious to water damage and was also more durable than the “featherie”.



*Young Tom Morris  
Winner of the Open  
four consecutive times.*

The gutty ball went about the same distance, but since the ball bounded much more than the feather ball, heated debate arose over the relative merits of each ball. Tom Morris, the young assistant of the staunch feather ball supporter (and feather ball maker! ) Allan Robertson, was caught playing this new ball and basically banished to the other coast of Scotland where he became the keeper of the green at Prestwick and started the first international medal play or stroke play championship—the Open Championship in 1860, which he would win four times.

Eventually Morris would return to be Keeper of the Green at the Old Course at St. Andrews. His son, young Tom, would become the almost unbeatable child prodigy champion who would win the Open Championship three straight years, 1868-1870, to claim permanent ownership of the Championship belt. So dominant was he that they didn't even hold the tournament the next year! They held the tournament in 1872 and

again Young Tom won! Tragically he would die later that year on Christmas Day, grieving the loss of his wife in childbirth while he had been playing golf.

Old Tom Morris' influence on the game of golf was extraordinary: he was a clubmaker, a ballmaker, a golf course architect, a great player, tutor to the greatest

player the game had ever seen, and the man who people went to for answers on rules questions. Indeed, the “Royal & Ancient” which is golf’s ruling body for worldwide golf (except in the US) has evolved directly from Old Tom Morris! It is not an exaggeration to say that Tom Morris is the most influential figure in the history of golf! He lived well into the wound ball era, passing on in 1908.

The clubs during the gutty era were similar to the feather ball era but the clubs evolved in response to the harder, livelier gutty ball. Clubheads were beefed up to withstand the impact with the harder ball, inserts in wood faces were a common repair, iron clubs came into their own since the gutty ball could be bladed or topped and the ball would not be ruined like the feather ball would be, indeed it could even be remolded!

With more and more players taking an interest in the game, innovations in club design started to appear in the 1880s and 1890s. Early woods had a concave shape to the face but by the 1890s, innovative clubmakers had figured out that a convex or “bulger” style head actually produced a better shot pattern. Another heated debate arose over the use of the newer, more compact metal-headed putters that were said to lack the feel of the traditional, larger wood head putters. Courses were being maintained better—many with grass mowers by the 1890s so that the really heavy iron heads that were so effective in driving the gutty out of the thick grass from just the previous few years were being replaced by smaller, lighter heads that were more suited to the shorter grasses. As we move into the wound ball era, we see a changing golf world, both in equipment and in the expanding popularity of golf worldwide.



### *Early Golf Balls*

*The three distinct eras of vintage wood shaft golf were distinguished by the ball used in each era. These three reproduction balls allow you to play hickory golf from any of these eras. The ball on the left is a feather ball reproduction from the feather ball era which lasted until 1850. The center ball is a gutty reproduction ball used at the National Hickory Championship. The gutty ball was in use from 1850-1900. The far right ball is a mesh pattern ball created by Chris McIntyre of California that was representative of balls from the 1900-1935 era. This ball played very much like our modern ball. There were no size and weight rule restrictions until late in the hickory era.*

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This new era would start with Coburn Haskell's invention of the wound golf ball in 1898. Haskell's patent ball had a solid center, rubber band windings, and a gutta percha cover—very much like a Titleist Professional from just a few years ago! This wound ball era would continue for 100 years! It has only been in the last few years with the introduction of high performance solid center balls, that top players worldwide have stopped playing wound golf balls! Indeed in 2007, no manufacturer that I know of is producing a wound ball.

The switch from gutty balls to wound balls was not something that happened overnight. Early examples of the Haskell ball had their problems. Good players who tested early samples panned the ball as no better or even worse than a good gutty. But the tweaking continued on this ball and in the 1902 British Open, a perennial contender, who admittedly was not quite in the league of the best players of the day, turned out to be one of only a few contestants playing the championship with a Haskell patent wound ball, and, as good fortune would have it, the ball was the very latest, updated version. Sandy Herd went from being about 30 yards behind everyone off the tee to out-driving the longest hitters! Herd won his only British Open Championship, beating Harry Vardon by a single stroke.

The next year, everyone had one of the new wound balls! Sandy Herd had beaten Harry Vardon, the best player of the day, and his two main rivals, J. H. Taylor, and James Braid. Between these three players, they won 16 of 20 British Open Championships between 1894 and 1914!

This wound ball, with its amazing distance off the tee, dramatically changed golf: wood clubheads got deeper and shorter from heel to toe, the old splice attachment of shaft to clubhead was abandoned for the current socket style attachment, iron heads got shorter, deeper and lighter in weight with scoring lines and dots on the face, innovations and patents abounded, and golf courses were lengthened dramatically to provide an appropriate challenge for the longer hitting ball.

The aerodynamics of the new ball were being experimented with as the bramble cover pattern would soon be replaced by dimple (1907) and mesh (1912) patterns. Scottish pros were arriving on U.S. shores where new job opportunities in golf were plentiful in a country where the game had just taken root. Charles Blair MacDonald, a native American, who was sent to prep school in St. Andrews, Scotland at age 17 and who had befriended young Tom Morris and his father, returned to the US with a passion for the game of golf that saw him start the first U.S. Open in 1895 among his many other contributions to golf.

Scots including Willie Dunn helped start the U. S. manufacture of golf clubs with the founding of the A. G. Spalding & Bros. Golf division in 1893, Bridgeport Gun & Implement Co. in 1897, and MacGregor Golf in 1897. Spalding paid for Harry Vardon to come to the US for nine months in 1899 and 1900 to stimulate interest in this fledgling sport of golf. Harry lost one match in that time and won the 1900 US Open!

In 1913, Francis Ouimet, a 19-year-old caddy, tied the legendary Harry Vardon and his buddy from England, Ted Ray, for the U.S. Open title and beat them both in a play-

off the next day! Suddenly America had its own native golf hero! Finishing just a stroke behind was 18 year old American Walter Hagen who would win the title the next year and go on to change the way golf pros would be looked at. With his flamboyant style and personal charisma, Hagen revolutionized the professional ranks that previously



*Francis Ouimet – Flanked by Harry Vardon (to his right) and Ted Ray. His victory caught the popular imagination and sparked the growth of American golf.*

had such a low social standing that they were not even allowed inside most golf clubhouses.

The 1920s were the Golden Age of hickory golf; with a booming economy and no wars, affluent America took strongly to the game and Hagen was joined by the imported Scot Tommy Armour, Gene Sarazen, and the young prodigy Bobby Jones as the premier players in the world. Hagen would travel the world, winning tournaments and promoting the game; Armour would win all the major championships and eventually gain the reputation as the world's finest golf instructor, Sarazen would win all the major

championships and introduce the modern sand wedge, and Bobby Jones, with his all-American good looks, would go on to do the impossible and win four major championships in one year in 1930 at the age of 28!

With the Great Depression, the coming of the steel shafts and finally war in Europe, the end of a very fascinating era had come to a close. The millions and millions of wood shafted clubs produced during these early eras were largely forgotten about. Some were cut down for junior golfers or used as starter sets. Many just collected dust in a closet or garage. Others were simply thrown away.

It wasn't until 1970 when Bob Kuntz and Joe Murdoch formed the Golf Collectors Society as a means of getting together with fellow collectors to buy, sell and trade old golf items, that interest in these old wood shaft golf clubs would start to be rekindled. In 1970, Frank Hardison, a scratch golfer from California, his brother Dick, and Chet Lynch started playing occasionally with hickory shafted clubs that they had picked up at thrift shops. Frank was a member of Santa Ana Country Club in Orange County, California, and in a discussion with the golf professional, Gerald Hall, they came up with the idea of holding a tournament for members and a few invited guests to play with hickory shafted clubs.



*Pat Kennedy of Vermont played in many early "hickory hackers".*



*Johnny Henry, a legend of Texas golf lore, won the 1977 GCS WORLD'S OPEN HICKORY HACKER CHAMPIONSHIP and is still competing 30 years later.*

Their first tournament was held in 1971. In preparing the details for the next year's tournament, they came up with the name "Hickory Hackers". Their first "Hickory Hackers" tournament was held in 1972 with 13 entrants. It was then held in subsequent years for about a decade. The rules of play limited a player to seven clubs, all wood shafts made prior to 1930. A 1916 golf rulebook governed play and all balls were to be teed up only on sand tees! Early contestants included Roger Cleveland, the club designer and founder of Cleveland Golf.

In 1973, Dick Hardison and Chet Lynch, who were members of the Golf Collectors Society, approached Joe Murdoch and offered to put together a hickory tournament for the members of the GCS. They gladly bequeathed the name "Hickory Hackers" to the GCS. At first, the tournament was not held at the site of the annual meeting as it is today, but each member, playing with a fellow member at his own club (or some other mutually agreed upon golf club), submitted course ratings and other details to Hardison and Lynch for equalizing of handicaps. Then on tournament day, each player submitted his scorecard attested by his fellow player or players.

The very first Golf Collectors Society Hickory Hacker Tournament was thus held in 1973 with this unique format and the winner was Jim Monaghan who shot a 72 at his home course with a hole-in-one on the second hole! All in all, 12 players turned in scorecards from around the country in this first event. The next year in the 1974 tournament, brothers Frank and Dick Hardison played the Old Course at St. Andrews with Frank shooting a 78 and Dick a 72, remarkable considering that they shared a five club set, picked up during their travels in Scotland, that consisted of an Anderson semi-long nose spoon, a mid-iron, a mashie, a niblick, and a long nose Forgan putter!

The following year saw the name of the tournament change to the "1975 World's Open Hickory Hacker Championship". Today the tournament is held in conjunction with the annual GCS meeting and draws over 100 players from around the world.



Warren Olson from Denison, Iowa started the “Heart of America Hickory Championship” in 1978 as a regional Golf Collectors Society tournament. Today this is the longest, continuously running hickory tournament in the world, having been contested every year since 1978.

Archie Baird and John Rigg started the Scottish Hickory Championship in 1985 and it became a part of the British Golf Collectors Society agenda.

The Canadian Hickory Championship was the brainchild of Ron Lyons in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 2000 and today is one of the top hickory tournaments in the world.

Pehr Thermaenius and Jorgen Linse started the immensely popular Swedish Hickory Championship.

Ralph Livingston III started the first website totally dedicated to hickory golf: **www. hickorygolf. com** and in the year 2000, Ralph also organized a spectacular, now biennial, international “Ryder Cup” style competition between the USA and Europe with David Hamilton of Scotland organizing the European side.

Pete Georgiady was responsible for the USA’s finest championship: the National Hickory Championship which originated in 1998 at the fabulous Oakhurst Links in West Virginia – the oldest golf course in the U. S.

Here, in Pete’s words, is how the birth of the National Hickory Championship came about: “I first heard about Oakhurst from Ralph Livingston and Roger Hill, as well as from Bud Dufner, all of whom had been there around the time the course reopened in late 1994. I had always harbored thoughts about going up there and finally a convenient reason to go appeared. The novelty of a golf course catering to those who wanted to play golf in the ancient style became an entry on my concept sheet, a list of



*John Rigg confers with Ralph Livingston III prior to the Scottish Hickory Championship*



*Canadian Hickory Championship founder Ron Lyons prepares to drive.*

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story ideas I circulated among the golf magazines as I marketed my ideas to get writing assignments. In the spring of 1996, Al Barkow of Golf Illustrated bought that story idea and sent me up there to write and shoot a photo or two. My son Bryan and I went, talked to the Kellers, played golf and fell in love with the place. The story appeared in a summer issue of GI. Shortly afterward, I got a similar assignment from Brett Avery at Golf Journal to do a longer, more detailed story on Oakhurst. I returned to Oakhurst, did my research and played nine holes with Lewis, Sr. It was a glorious early summer day and there was no one else on the course. We played at a very leisurely rate, almost a very deliberately slow pace because we were conversing about so many things. That round of nine took us almost three hours to play, the conversation was so voluminous. I recall distinctly being on the fairway of the eighth hole, around the place where we moderate hitters place our second shots. As I was preparing to make a stroke I stepped back from the ball and looked at Mr. Keller. "Why can't we have a tournament here?" I asked him. And from that moment the idea was hatched. The first several Tournaments were organized by Mr. Keller with



*Lewis Keller, Randy Jensen, and Pete Georgiady at the National Hickory Championship.*



*Today hickory golf is enjoyed worldwide as Hans Murray and Carl Folcker, playing in the Swedish Hickory Championship, can attest.*

a lot of help from his family, my son Bryan and myself. I had played hickory golf, of the 1920s variety, almost since my first meeting with the Golf Collectors Society. Knowing the basics of those outings, and that there was a pool of people who were beginning to play hickory golf with some regularity, I set to work to plan for a meeting at Oakhurst. It took a year from inception to execution and the first tournament was scheduled for Independence Day weekend, 1998. Forty-one



*The final group plays the last hole at Oakhurst Links in The National Hickory Championship.*

using 1920s clubs. Randy, Ralph, and Don Gibboney came with authentic 19th century clubs; the rest of us used Oakhurst's replica sets. There was no prohibition against women but it wasn't until the following year that women entered. The next year 25 people came with antique 1890s clubs. Currently between 65 and 80% of all contestants have antique 19th century playing sets with many golfers using them only once a year—at the NHC. "

With the growth in popularity of hickory golf competitions, club designer and hickory golfer Tad Moore and a core of hickory golf enthusiasts brought the Society of Hickory Golfers into being in 2002. The original core group included: Ralph Livingston III, Tad Moore, Roger Hill, Randy Jensen, Chuck McMullin, John Crow Miller, Winfield Padgett, John Sherwood, Brian Siplo, and Philip Truett.

Today, the future of hickory golf looks bright as more and more first class hickory competitions are added to the schedule every year.

people entered. At that time, a two-day hickory tournament was unheard of. The NHC was the first and was planned that way with the idea that the champion would have to play well twice in order to win. Oakhurst didn't have enough sets of 19th century replica clubs to equip everyone so we had both 19th century and early twentieth century divisions. Randy Jensen won the authentic group while Jay Harris won



*Tad Moore not only designs modern clubs, but also reproduction hickory era clubs!*